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AUTHOR Ongiri, David O.
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ABSTRACT

Although any definition of the educational philosophy of informal education is sure to be incomplete, for the purposes of this paper the following characteristics will be sufficient: a) informal British schools are "de-institutionalized"; b) they stress individualization; c) detailed observation of a child's work over a long period of time is the primary evaluative source, rather than tests; d) teachers, headmasters, and principals play an active role in curriculum development; and e) teachers accept the notion that children's learning proceeds from concrete to abstract. Although in its purest concept informal education rejects the use of tests in the classroom, some informal educators justify the use of tests for judging the achievement of program objectives. Tests, however, should never go against one of the primary attributes of informal education, which is its humaneness: tests should not inspire fear or teacher tyranny or be used for educational politics. Teachers must avoid misinterpreting, misusing, and misunderstanding testing procedures. Tests used in the informal classroom become part of a totality of information about the child's progress and needs. (JA)

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TESTING IN THE INFORMAL SETTING

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DAVID O. ONGIRI
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION
PENN STATE UNIVERSITY
CAPITOL CAMPUS

PRESENTED AT 1973 INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
ON TESTING IN HAGUE, THE NETHERLANDS,
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TESTING IN THE INFORMAL SETTING

Informal education is the latest educational philosophy to gain a broad following in the United States, having its more recent origins in the British infant and primary schools but harkening back to the days when John Dewey and progressivism were of vast influence. Although it is most likely impossible to provide a definition of informal education that will be acceptable to all, for the purposes of this paper we will accept the following as generally shared characteristics of informal education: (Vincent R. Rogers. "Open Schools on the British Model." Educational Leadership. 29(5): p. 402, February, 1972.)

1. Informal British schools are distinguished by the degree to which they have become "de-institutionalized." Children move freely about such schools, in classrooms and corridors alive with colors and things of all sorts. Old chairs, rugs and carpets, ovens and animals, all give a warm, human, non-school (in the traditional sense) atmosphere to the building.

2. Teachers seem to accept a fuller, broader interpretation of the idea of "individualization." Children are seen as unique or different in terms of their total growth patterns as human beings rather than in a narrow skill development sense.

3. Teachers in informal schools place far more value on detailed observation of a child's work over a long period of time as a primary evaluative source than they do on more formal testing procedures.

4. Teachers (and headmasters or principals) play a far more active role in making day-to-day curricular decisions of all kinds than do their counterparts in more formal schools. If, in fact, teachers are more attuned to children and their needs and interests in such schools, city-or district-wide "programs" or curricula make little sense, and the individual teacher becomes a dynamic curricular agent.

5. Teachers in such schools seem to accept fully the notion (so much the essence of Piaget) that children's learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, and the premature abstraction is one of the great weaknesses of the traditional school. Thus the emphasis on concrete materials, and encounters with real people and places whenever possible.

As mentioned in the above statement, tests and testing, particularly formalized mass testing, do not enjoy a hallowed position in informal education. In fact, many early proponents of informal education in the USA such as Herbert Kohl, see testing as precisely one of the educational evils which informal education hopes to overcome; to quote, "Tests are made to measure one student against another student or to measure a student's performance against some standard which is expected of him. When a teacher abandons the notion that all students must live up to some given standards, or have their worth measured against the worth of other students, new means of evaluating a student's work must be developed." (The Open Classroom, New York: The New York Review of Books, 1969.)

Not all informal educators have chosen to reject the use of tests in the classroom, however, relying upon the use of standardized tests such as SRA achievement tests and Lorge-Thorndike verbal and non-verbal ability tests to evaluate the success or failure of their program in fulfilling its educational objectives. A report on "Evaluating an Open School," relates the type of evaluative instruments used in making program modification in an informal educational plan on the junior high school level in a public school setting. SRA achievement scores played a significant role in program evaluation as did other less formalized evaluation techniques.

Such informal evaluation techniques as a student attitude inventory, which was devised as a means of getting student input into the evaluation of the program, were used. These inventories rated student-teacher interaction, peer acceptance, comparative achievement, interest in school, and reaction to aides and

teacher-counselors. A shadow study survey was used as a means determining how students and teachers used their time. Observers were used to rate their use of time on a scale from "completely wasted" to "best possible", with student and teacher participants being selected at random. Parents were also asked to complete program surveys.

Carson concluded, "The model school program at Edgewood is presently in its third year of implementation. It has changed in many ways from the original plan, but the major goals remained the same. When making program modifications, a strong effort has been made to support decisions with evaluative data. This may be the most important outcome of the program." (The National Elementary Principal, 52:96-98, February, 1973.)

The teacher in the informal classroom may also find observation of a child completing an assigned task a beneficial means of evaluating program effectiveness. An asset that must not be overlooked is the ability of the teacher to skillfully observe the student at work to ascertain problems, success or failure in accomplishing the task. Such techniques can only be acquired through carefully training teachers for this and retraining from time to time to improve and maintain these skills.

Although there will no doubt still be continuing disagreement over the extent to which testing, especially formal testing, is used in the informal classroom, it can be said that a solid program mandates clear objectives, expressed in behavioral terms. Such objectives should be assessed by the best possible means.

Testing can be a valuable tool for ascertaining how thoroughly program objectives are being achieved. A good test should accu-

rately measure skills and/or knowledge. Whenever an educational setting exists, some forms of testing are needed. To think otherwise is evidence of naivete or an unwillingness to confront the reality of the success or failure of the program in enhancing the learning of children. A well-considered testing program in conjunction with an informal classroom setting may indeed provide the best of all possible worlds educationally for the child.

Testing can fail in the informal classroom when it is not carried out in the spirit of informal education. Proponents of informal education see one of its primary attributes in its humaneness; any testing method, whether of the formal or informal variety, must not infringe on this humaneness and must be in keeping with the overall atmosphere of the classroom.

The spectre of fear and anxiety that frequently falls over the conventional classroom when formal testing programs are undertaken must be eliminated in the informal classroom as much as possible. Students should understand that formal tests are administered primarily for guidance purposes of program evaluation rather than to determine the personal merits and defects of individual students. Students can also be helped to succeed in such tests and prepared as much as possible in advance to eliminate the worry that can occur. The teacher's positive, helpful attitude can do much to overcome anxiety.

The teacher must also be on guard to avoid misuse of testing. Misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and unpreparedness can lead to failure of a testing program in the informal classroom, just as it can in the conventional classroom. There must be present within the teaching staff a clear understanding of the purposes and limitations of any testing pro-

gram that will be undertaken. Henry S. Dyer, vice-president of Educational Testing Service, one of the leading American companies involved in standardized testing, stated these problems quite succinctly,

> "One of the glaring problems in this connection is that of getting those who make educational decisions on the basis of test scores to realize that the best of achievement tests is never more than a sample of a student's performance and is therefore inevitably subject to sampling error. Another glaring problem in the interpretation of academic achievement tests has to do with the kinds of numbers in which the measures are customarily expressed-namely, so-called grade equivalency scores. Except for the notorious IQ, these are probably the most convenient devices ever invented to lead people into misinterpretations of students' test results. Both the IQ and grade equivalency scores are psychological and statistical monstrosities." (John Henry Martin and Charles H. Harrison. Free to Learn. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:Prentice-Hall. 1972.)

It is to be hoped that the teacher in the informal classroom will have the fortitude and knowledge to staunchly resist such misuse of test results as Dyer has mentioned.

Tests can indeed be the tyranny of the informal classroom when certain rigid standards of achievement on test scores are insisted upon with tenacity by parents and administrators. If the informal classroom teachers decide that formal tests will be useful to them in evaluating their program, they must use their best persuasive efforts to convince parents and administrators that the program should be considered a failure to be abandoned if all scores do not reach a certain predetermined, arbitrary point. Tests should be considered as guides, not as dictators to be slavishly obeyed.

The teacher must also be on guard against any veiled tendencies to use test results for basically political purposes, in other words contriving results to show the program or student progress in a distorted light. This can sometimes be tempting, especially when opponents of

informal education wield heavy influence, but other means, especially strong parental and community involvement in the program from the very beginning, can certainly be found to present positively the merits of the program honestly.

Obviously it is helpful if the teacher is free to function in an atmosphere without the pressure of having to achieve certain test scores. This is especially important in the beginning of a program. It is advised that particularly in the first year of program implementation evaluation techniques other than formal standardized test be given primary precedence.

Testing works best in the informal classroom when it incorporates the unique aspects of informal instruction. Certain characteristics of learning such as curiosity and creativity which tend to be rewarded and reinforced in the informal classroom to a significant degree should also be included in testing methods whenever possible. Certain standardized tests, such as the Torrance Minnesota Tests of Creativity and Curiosity questionnaires, Specific Curiosity and Reactive Curiosity can be useful in this regard. (F.S. Wilson, T. Stuckey and R. Langevin. "Are Pupils in the Open School Plan Different?" The Journal of Educational Research. 66: 115-118. November, 1972.)

In many cases the teacher will also be devising such tests for use in her classroom, independent of outside resources. It seems likely that as informal education grows in influence many more tests especially suited to its unique needs will be constructed for national usage. Current tests can sometimes be helpful but more tests are needed.

What about the use of IQ tests in the informal classroom? Lillian Weber points out that in the British infant school, IQ tests are used

only as an indicator of individual differences, if they are used at all.

> "In other words, it was used as a tool, and related to the old search for adequate match with individual need and difference. But all of the unique individuality of a child could not be defined by a test for intellectual function, and in the infant school the provision for intellectual function was only a small part of the provision for individual difference.
>
> The informal school's role in support of the real individuality of a child has been broadly defined. No matter what his IQ, the school was committed to support the continuity and process of a child's development, its uneven and individual pace and pattern, its wholeness-emotional, social and intellectual. The organizational adaptations made to support this development led to the truly individualized and flexible infant school program which did not need streaming by IQ to provide for individuality..... In their broad context, the IQ is only a peripheral tool, basically irrelevant to helpful school organization." (Lillian Weber, The English Infant School and Informal Education. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1971.)

The fact that IQ test scores are likely to be unreliable predicators of intelligence among children from lower-socioeconomic groups whose use of language varies from that of the test-makers is another reason for not giving them a great deal of importance in terms of classroom planning in informal education.

A testing program can help the teacher to advance the goal of individualization of instruction in the classroom when the testing is geared to the needs of the child and when the testing is primarily diagnostic in intent.

Tests used in the informal classroom become part of a totality of information about the child's progress and needs. The teacher in the informal classroom generally makes it a practice to keep extensive records of student progress and activities, testing can appropriately be included in these records as a part of the totality of the child's

school life. Children should be involved in this record-keeping as much as possible, this can aid the child in demystifying testing procedures and viewing tests as guidance sources rather than a gauge of self esteem.

Although the recent past of informal education reveals a lack of concern in many cases about testing and sometimes a rejection of most forms of testing, future revisions of program and development of new programs is likely to see more important place on new uses for testing rather than outright rejection. The literature reflects this already in many cases. Testing does have a place in the informal classroom, if the teacher is creative and informed enough to find it.

Several general conclusions can then be drawn about the nature of testing in relationship to informal education.

1. Testing is playing and will continue to play an important role in informal classrooms as a part of the data -gathering process.

2. Although presently more interest is vested in informal testing procedures, there is a continuing search for more standardized tests to be used in informal classes and this will be continued in the future. Many such tests are presently in developmental stages.

3. Tests in the informal classroom are used for help in program evaluation and for purposes of diagnosis and guidance, not to compare students and encourage competition as in the past.

4. The teacher must be judicious in avoiding misinterpretation, misuse, and misunderstanding of testing procedures, this can be a problem in the informal classroom just as in the conventional educational setting.

5. Tests must be modified or developed so as to include all aspects of learning as currently encompassed in the informal classroom such as creativity, curiosity and independence, as well as other cognitive and affective domains that receive strong reinforcement.

6. To generate the most beneficial results instruction should avoid being test dependent, rather tests should be used primarily for guidance and informational purposes.

7. There is a lack of information in the literature regarding the uses of testing in the informal classroom, and suggesting means of using testing to its best advantage in this situation. It is to be hoped that this area will attract the interest of researchers in the future so that educators in the informal classroom will have the benefits of their findings.

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